

THE GAY CHRISTIAN

A journal of
theological
reflection
from Metropolitan
Community Church



Oralley



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God is being born in our hearts to teach us to level the heavens and exalt the earth and create a new world without masters and slaves, rulers and subjects; no, not even men as first and women kept behind in meek servility. This is what Jesus meant when he taught us to pray for God's Kingdom to come, for God's will to be done on earth, as it is in heaven; to forgive each other, and not to be led into temptation, but delivered from evil.

But who will be ready to hear this message, Mary thought. Although the throne of God has been emptied at Jesus' death, even now Peter and some of the other disciples are busy trying to fill it again. They will fashion the risen Jesus into a new Lord and Master to represent the heavenly Father and to rule upon the earth. Oh yes, they were his humble servants. In his name they will rebuke the Jews and conquer the gentiles, lording it

over them as the Romans now lord over us. Mary shuddered. Is there any way to rend this fabric, to let the light of this other world shine through? Perhaps something of this other vision will still get through the distortion. Other people, even women like myself, will glimpse something of the real vision, and they will recognize me as their sister.

The Tasks

GOD IS CALLING THE
METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES
TO PERFORM

JAMES S. TINNEY

An Address to the 10th International General Conference of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, Meeting in Houston.

I COME TO YOU today from the midst of battle. Since organizing the Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights last year, I have become the subject of numerous attacks. Some, who I thought were friends, have deserted and gone. One bishop of our church has called my name publicly in a sermon before a jurisdictional conference; and another has written a two-part article against my position in our denominational periodical. The Pentecostal chaplain at Howard University has removed me from my position as faculty advisor to the Pentecostal Student Fellowship after having served in this capacity for more than seven years. And the leading interdenominational Pentecostal/Charismatic magazine in the nation, in its last issue, called for my excommunication from the church.

But these examples are not something entirely new. All my life as a Christian I have known suffering. I was taught to deny my most inherent self, flagellate my spirit for my so-called "carnal lusts," penitently grovel in the floor every time I thought about sex, and spend sleepless nights in fear that I might die and go to hell before having another night's chance to prove that I could go to sleep with more exotic fantasies and dreams.

I have also been rejected by my wife, who tore my two daughters from my breast and left me without warning to face the future alone - despite the fact that I had begged her to stay, had asked her to let me live with them, and had

assured her that my sexuality was not the sum total of relationships (whether husbanding or parenting).

I have been told by a trusted friend that homosexuality is most rampant among persons who are either extremely light or extremely dark in complexion, as if both light-skin and gayness were twin symptoms of some physical plague or innate deficiency.

I have also suffered from the pains of having a former pastor accuse me of desecrating the house of God by using a church phone to talk to a male friend - a pastor who threatened to call the police and have me arrested in his own office, and who advised my wife (in my presence) that she should leave me since I was unfit to rear our children, and who forced me to sign a letter of confession and resignation from the ministry under the lie that God would never use me to speak God's name in public again.

I have endured endless prophecies in church - prophecies of God's hatred, my forthcoming poverty, and of having "crossed the line" which marked the point of impossible return to grace. Even worse, I have been told (and convinced, at one point) that my love for men was the result of hordes of live, overpowering demons, straight from hell, within my bosom. Who can even imagine the total anomie, despair and self-hatred that were thus heaped upon me, causing me to publicly undergo a ritual of exorcism aimed at ridding my body of

this so-called Satanic possession.

I know what it is to live, almost daily, under the catcalls of "punk," "faggot," "sissy" - all announced before friends and enemies, males and females, sinners and saints, at every conceivable location: at church, the grocery, the corner store, school, on public transit, and more. Only those who endure such flagrant violence to the human spirit know the fear, the fatigue, and the temporary emotional and mental disorientation that occur under such circumstances, causing a person to become afraid to smile, to say hello, or even ask a harmless question of direction, lest it be misinterpreted as a solicitation and provoke a volley of verbal abuse. Nor has it all been verbal. Many times I have been robbed, attacked, kicked, and beaten - once in broad daylight on a crowded downtown street - for no other reason than that I was who I am.

I have had my humanity reviled, my spirituality condemned, my academic research questioned, my speeches interrupted, my job threatened, my own family taken from me, and my own body hurt and abused. And for what reason? Simply because I am who I am - a lonely soul crying out in the midst of an inhumane world for the freedom to love.

Ask me not if my suffering causes me to long for some other orientation, some different direction of affection - as if I would become heterosexual if I could. My answer is this: Never would I choose

to be other than I am. If I were to exchange who I am and what I am for some other, it would be no longer I who lived, but them. My being is God's gift of creation; to deny myself would be to deny God's own self.

Therefore, let the world pity me not for my past misfortunes, as if having been told the story of lifelong oppression they now "understand" why I am a homosexual - making victimization the cause of my identity rather than the result of it. As long as I can remember, I have loved men as the most natural thing I can do. I was yearning for men at the age of four, and possibly earlier. That desire that sense of longing- has guided every decision I have ever made, every conflict I have ever resolved, every hope I have ever dreamed, every experience of mind and body and spirit I have undergone, and every lesson I have learned.

Tell me no more that I deserve the pains of hell, the fears of conscience, and eternal suffering. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that I have suffered enough already to atone for every sin I have ever done, if suffering were sufficient to erase them. And I have suffered meritoriously. I am no martyr. But I tell you that all the martyrs that have ever lived have died no more senseless death than that which is done to my spirit and my integrity every day.

But I have come to the point where I refuse to let fear control my life any longer. I choose the option of confronting both fear and those who make me fearful. And I refuse to give fear more respect than the respect I give my own nature and my enabling God.

Am I saddened because of the injustices that the family, the church, the school, the government, this society, have heaped upon me? Never. I am not sad; I am angry. And when I realize that my own injustice is but a minute part of the injustice that is multiplied in the lives of millions of others like me, my anger is compounded. I live every moment in the realization that anger can be a channel of redemption insofar as I understand it, accept it, and utilize it to struggle against oppression. It is not my anger, it is their anger that cannot be understood and must not be accepted. My anger, your anger, our anger, are gifts of God; and our willingness to act upon it is the only hope we have for a better world.

Unfortunately, much of our suffering as lesbians and gays comes from the church itself. From the earliest beginnings

of time, there were men from the same rooted tree from which Judaism and Christianity later blossomed, who decided in themselves that they would preserve for themselves the fruits of everybody's labor. They would decide who would get what. Of course, this hierarchical distribution displaced certain persons from power, and often from sharing the surpluses. Of course, children were put out, women were put out, lesbians and gays were put out, people of other faiths were put out, and people of other nationalities were put out - in order to preserve the successes and royalties for a select number of white, heterosexual men.

This practice was carried over - in the name of God and Christianity - until eventually the patriarchal nuclear family was viewed as the only pattern of God for the ages. The plan, of course, was for the man - the father - to be the head of that family. The man was to control the wealth. And the man would decide which of the children would inherit the wealth upon reaching adulthood.

In order to legitimize that rule, a change was also made in the arrangement of families into a nation-state. The nation-state became viewed as God's own select nation, to the exclusion of all others. The idea of an authoritarian and very narrowly defined family was transferred to the state. All family men then saw themselves as the progenitors of the state and as its protectors and its enactors.

These same patterns eventually were also carried over into the synagogue and the church. So that white straight men also inherited the rule of the spiritual "family of God" even as they had made themselves the rulers of society as a whole. Religion, in the process, became twisted and warped. It became desecrated in the name of God until, in many ways, it no longer served the functions God intended it to serve. To legitimize the social system of oppression, people were taught that God was only a father, but not a mother. They were taught that God sent Jesus Christ into the world to establish a hierarchical kingdom, rather than a community of equal persons. They were taught that Jesus' supreme title was lord, rather than savior, comforter, or liberator. They were taught that women were less than men - because God was male, and because only men could rightfully assume the prerogatives of God.

The oppression of lesbians and gays was also legitimized by the teaching that

God was "straight," forbidding homosexual men to inherit the fruits. And they were taught, that since God has only one favorite nation - or, at most, two nations: Anglo-Saxons replacing the Israel of older times - whatever was done in the name of Judaism or Christianity or America was okay. They taught that, not only was God a "straight" man, but he also had blue eyes and white skin. Such a portrayal of course, legitimized oppression of peoples of color in the name of religion. So that Asian children, and Black children, and Hispanic children, would kneel down before paintings of a white Jesus with blonde hair.

Yet in this construction, the church has betrayed its own self. The social institution known as the church has left its calling and forsaken its God by creating and perpetuating these myths of sex and gender and race. It teaches middle class social values relative to sex and property. It contends that only men - heterosexual men - are fit to teach and to preach and to rule the house of God. It says that "women should keep silence in the churches," and that the church is the "bride of Christ," and that every soul should be subject and obedient to a male higher power. It says that white represents good, and black represents evil; and that the purpose of salvation is to "wash me whiter than snow," so that we can become "children of light" rather than darkness, and can be clothed in "white robes of righteousness."

To reinforce such mythology, all our children in evangelical churches are shown the so-called "Wordless Book." One page is held up - a black page - and the child is asked, "What is this? It is my heart before Jesus comes into my life." Then a red page is held up. "And what is this? It is the blood of Jesus that was shed for my sins." And then a white page is held up and the child is told, "This is what your dirty black heart will look like after Jesus washes you whiter than snow." As a result, from our earliest years, all of us - Black and white - are socialized into accepting a system of religion that oppresses all of us. What is worse, we don't even realize it.

I believe in salvation, but there are many ways to describe salvation other than "washing whiter than snow." I have been redeemed. I have been liberated. I have been set free. My sins are forgiven. My name is written in heaven. Why do I have to be "washed whiter than snow?"

To say, however, that religion has been twisted and changed from what it

was intended divinely to be, is not to pass judgment on religion itself, nor on God, nor on the concept of spirituality, nor on rituals of meaning and self-affirmation and symbols of ultimate value. It is not to dismiss Jesus Christ as divine or the possibility of the Holy Spirit working in this generation. But it is a rejection of Christianity as a system of exploitation - not a rejection of Christ. It is a rejection of the way "straight" white males have distorted it to serve their own ends, protect their own vested interests, and conserve their own privileges and power. Our call today is to rediscover, to find, that kernel of truth that has been covered over by layers of social oppression and lies and deception. We will then once again be able to repeat with meaning the words of the Christ who said, "The one whom I set free is free indeed!"

If we say that orthodox Christian faith is incompatible with women's liberation, or incompatible with Hispanic liberation or Black liberation, or incompatible with gay liberation, then we concede the greatest part of the opponents' argument; and I, for one, am not willing to do that. For this is what the organized Christian church has always said to us, that there existed an inherent contradiction between these movements and true faith. Our religious opponents desire nothing more than to hear that women and Blacks and Hispanics and gays have given up on the Christian faith - so they can be left alone to perpetuate their lies.

There is no evidence that becoming less Christian or less orthodox will further the cause of making the church more inclusive. The history of non-Christian religions, and of radical and political social movements, proves that racism and sexism are as "at home" in liberal and radical social and political and religious environments as they are in conservative Christian environments. Those of us who are Black have experienced many predominantly white movements and organizations which preach loudly against racism, but are themselves infected with racism. There are also organizations which preach against sexism, but which are themselves sexist. There are those who say they love homosexuals but hate the sin; all the while they really hate us, knowing as they do that they can't separate us from what they call our "sin." The Quakers were abolitionists, but they never got many Blacks to join their meetings. (And I am not speaking against Quakers.) The Unitarians, in spite

of their progressive stance against racism, have not been very successful in attracting Black members either. (And I do not speak against Unitarians; I recently spoke for their general convention, and appreciated so much that opportunity, and respect that denomination very much.) Even the United Church of Christ, which has the most active Commission on Racial Justice of any denomination, has fewer Black churches than the Seventh-Day Adventists. This says to me that the root of the problems of racism and sexism goes deeper than conservatism or liberalism. It is something systemic and organizational; something structural and at the very heart of Western society. It is something that has caused churches of all descriptions, from the most conservative to the most liberal, to be held almost powerless in its grip.

In order for MCC to conquer racism in its midst; in order to conquer sexism in its midst; even in order to conquer heterosexism in a gay church, we must discover the roots of oppression, so that we can smite it with a mighty blow. Otherwise, if we are not careful, when we cover up oppression in one corner, it will pop up in another form in another corner. I believe that God has raised up the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches in order that it might become the church God intends all churches to become. But to be honest, I am distressed at the slowness of pace at which we ourselves, who call ourselves oppressed, are unable to deal with our own oppressiveness toward those who are different than us.

The first thing I think God is calling MCC to do, is to examine its relationship to culture. It must examine its relationship to "straight" culture. It must examine its relationship to gay culture. It must examine its relationship to Christianity as a system, and to what we think of as being Christian culture. MCC must discover the ways in which all three cultures have served oppression, to make certain we don't unwittingly permit the same instruments of oppression to survive in our own midst.

In order for MCC to become the church God wants it to be, it must thoroughly examine its relationships and its assumptions and its values to see how many of these come from culture rather than from God's word and will.

This means also that the church must reject the usage of white gay men by heterosexual market forces that are now controlling the movement of gays in

every major city. And those who are white and gay are going to have to realize that they are being exploited given a little space, a "gay ghetto" - simply for others' selfish corporate motives. There is a plan it may not be a conscious conspiracy, but it operates just as devastatingly as if it were - a plan by which, first of all, lesbians and gays are themselves discriminated against in housing, and then ghettoized in gay residential areas, and then used as an unwitting vanguard to recapture properties in the central cities from the poor (who happen to be mostly Black and Hispanic), in preparation for the resale of those same properties, once renovated, to non-gay, white straight members of the ruling class. If we cannot understand this process by which property values escalate, and see how gays are being used in order to "get rid" of what society has called the "undesirable elements," to make way for the straight ruling class to take over, then we are really blind.

Racism, patriarchy, and homophobia are not just "sins." And MCC needs to clearly realize this. If racism and sexism were simply sins, then they could be confessed, forgiven, and forgotten. But it's not that easy. They are institutions, methods of organization and rule, of a social order. They are caused by sin, they express the character of sin, and they reinforce and promote more sin. But the church has erred in viewing racism and patriarchy and homophobia as simply sin themselves. This has led to two obvious conclusions. Either it can be ritualized away and not taken seriously, like other sins. Or it is such that it forever offends a holy God, who casts all sinners from grace - in effect, removing the offender from hope and the means of grace, as a hopeless and forlorn sinner. (Such a person reasons, "So, what, if I am a racist; I am going to hell anyway.") Either way, we imagine ourselves excused from assuming responsibility to uproot and remove and replace such institutions of evil.

Second, I believe God is calling MCC to develop a theology of sexuality. There are some, I am sure, who would prefer to speak of creating a "gay theology" or a theology of homosexual relations. But the truth is that a far more fundamental and dramatic effort is mandated than merely altering existing theology in only one aspect. We cannot satisfy the longing or the minds of the people as long as we pretend that all that is required of ministers and teachers is to reinterpret a

handful of scriptures referring to Sodom (in the Old Testament) and homosexual prostitution (in the New Testament). We are being intellectually dishonest and theologically lazy if we only try to reconcile lesbianism and homosexuality with traditional doctrines of fornication, adultery, lust, marriage, and chastity.

The confusion about lesbian and gay sexual ethics which now surrounds all Christians who are also practicing lesbians and gays, stems from this very failure to come up with a general theology of sexuality. It is time to quit pouring new wine into old wineskins. It is time to place this treasure in a new earthen vessel. Questions of sexuality are of extreme relevance to a whole bundle of other doctrines as well - doctrines of sin, salvation, and sanctification; the doctrine of humanity itself. All these have been corrupted and twisted as a result of a false theology of sexuality. Sexual theology can be done in either an evangelical or a liberal mode. The choice is yours; but for God's sake, wrestle with the task, and do something about it, so that religion is not prostituted any longer.

Indeed, I have a feeling that the development of a theology of sexuality for all Christianity, might be the greatest contribution MCC could ever make to the Christian world. "Who knows but what you have come into the world for such a time as this?"

I really believe it is foolish to tackle questions of sexual ethics without first redoing sexual theology. To attempt to do so is to distribute lesbianism and homosexuality around the same norms that have been the source of our oppression both in the church and outside it. The whole idea of sexuality as received in Western culture is a socially constructed and hierarchically defined category whose definition, regulation, and meaning change according to the social praxis of straight white males. What we must do is challenge this intrinsic definition, even as we challenge the oppressive system it was designed to legitimate.

In this respect I must say something about Samaritan Theological Institute. STI is extremely important. If you will notice, in the gay community, we have created all kinds of social institutions. There are gay churches and gay bars and gay business establishments; but there are no gay schools. Now the easy answer as to why this gap occurs, would be to say it is because of the ambiguous relationship of parenting (and children) among

lesbians and gay men. But I don't think this is the correct answer. I think it is rather because we lack knowledge about our own gay life and condition - because we lack agreement and understanding about the socialization we experience as lesbians and gays in a heterosexual world, and because we lack a common culture to transmit to future generations. It seems to me that the gay community has no point of reference of its own, but derives all of its meanings from the straight world. Indeed, Samaritan Theological Institute occupies a singular and salutary position in this respect: it is the only effort of lesbians and gays to establish some kind of educational institution to think through these problems and to develop a theology of sexuality. Because of this, it may be the most important endeavor of MCC, other than worship and evangelism.

Third, I believe God is calling this organization (not only to reevaluate its relationship to culture, and not only to develop a theology of sexuality, but) to form a new community. We have seen a lot of emphasis lately on the idea of community. Radical evangelicals, Catholic charismatics, pacifist churches, the Catholic Worker Movement, and non-religious neighborhood self-help groups, are all espousing the concept of community. Certainly, community is a viable concept; it is an improvement over hierarchical figures of speech. But community itself is an innocuous term that is sometimes used to mean something good, and sometimes used to mean something less than good. It may mean no more than the building and edifying of an elitist collection of persons who already share narrowly defined objectives. Thus we have communities that exclude non-charismatics, communities that exclude non-fundamentalists, communities that exclude sexist male privilege over women, communities that demand complete obedience from all members in the name of discipleship and shepherding, and communities that are virtually nothing more than exclusive gatherings of those who share privilege, wealth, and power.

So community itself is not enough. I have myself heard complaints that there are some local MCC's that are little more than a social club for white males. But this is a reputation the church cannot afford to have if it is to serve and to save the entire gay community - a just, a loving, a righteous and liberating center. It must become the place where the Spirit

of Jesus Christ is at work liberating the poor, delivering the captives, giving sight to the blind, freeing the slaves and the incarcerated, and proclaiming the inauguration of a new era of God. But MCC can only become this inasmuch and insofar as it is identified with those who are on the outside, those who are on the bottom, and those who are poor, and those who are powerless.

Only if MCC becomes a community of the oppressed, can it fulfill its calling and its mission. Becoming a community of the oppressed will be evidenced by becoming a community among the oppressed, and between the oppressed, and for the oppressed - all the oppressed: Blacks, Hispanics, and all people of color, women, and gays. Gay Christians will then no longer consider straight white males, and the established structures of Christendom, and Western society, and the northern hemisphere, and the North Atlantic Community, as natural allies. No longer then will MCC consider these its frame of reference, the center of its affection, or the home of ultimate loyalty. It is not enough to be pro-Black, or pro-Hispanic, or pro-women; we must challenge the concepts which support and bolster racism and sexism.

In conclusion, let me say that this church, which I love although I am not officially a member of it, cannot afford to be regarded as just another Protestant sect, or even as some novel sociological development inevitably produced by changing times. It is not simply the outgrowth of a sexual revolution of the sixties, nor the manifestation of unresolved guilt complexes suffered by participants in the gay liberation movement of the seventies. Nor even is it a sign of Americans' fascination with new religious movements in the eighties. MCC must not become simply a place where fundamentalists (who cannot be accepted in their own Bible-believing churches) seek a fortress of faith from which they can hurl back fiery darts of spiritual pride that say, "See, I can be just as conservative as you in every other area." And neither dare it become a hodge-podge conglomerate of anything and everything that speaks the name of religion, resulting in loss of definition, a lack of vision, and a lessening of faith.

I believe MCC is called to a new vision, a new hope, and a new task - something that has not yet been accomplished in any other denomination. It might not be accomplished here, but the choice is up to you.

